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REAGAN DEFEATED IN HOUSE ON AIDING NICARAGUA REBELS

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WASHINGTON, March 20 — The House of Representatives today rejected President Reagan's request to send \$100 million to the rebels fighting to overthrow the Nicaraguan Government.

The vote was 222 to 210, with 16 Republicans joining 206 Democrats in re-

buffing the President on what he described as a major test of his Presidency.

Forty-six Democrats and 164 Republicans supported Mr. Reagan, who was calling wavering lawmakers right up until the vote and asking for their backing.

Democrats and Republicans alike said that the outcome reflected a deep-seated confusion and uneasiness in the country over the President's policy toward Central America. Mr. Reagan, Congressional leaders agreed, failed to convince enough House members that he has seriously tried to negotiate a peaceful settlement in the region.

'It's Not Over Now'

"The public," said Representative Thomas S. Foley of Washington, the Democratic whip, "is not ready to engage in the escalation of military violence in Central America until other avenues are fully explored."

However, leaders in both parties also agree that a majority of Congress supports military aid for the rebels in some form. In the weeks ahead, they said, the lawmakers are likely to approve compromise legislation containing such aid.

"It's not a one shot thing, it's not over now," said Representative Dick Cheney of Wyoming, a senior member of the Republican leadership. "I think eventually we'll pass a package for Central America and it will include military aid."

Whatever aid package does emerge from Congress is likely to delay the release of military support while the Administration is urged to pursue negotiations more vigorously. Under most proposals now being advanced on Capitol Hill, the money would be spent only if Congress determined that the Sandinista Government in Nicaragua was not bargaining in good faith.

Even while they were rejecting the Administration's approach to Nicaragua, many lawmakers expressed their deepening frustrations today over a situation that seems increasingly intractable.

Representative Dave McCurdy, an Oklahoma Democrat who is helping to draft an alternative to Mr. Reagan's plan, expressed the mood of many members of Congress when he said: "There's no magic solution out there. It's a very complex, complicated problem."

Public's Attitude Noted

The vote today was the latest chapter in a long-running story on Capitol Hill. Congress voted to cut off all aid to the Nicaraguan rebels in 1984, but agreed last year to send \$27 million in nonmilitary help. In the meantime, private supporters of the guerrillas organized a fund-raising drive to finance the purchase of weapons and other supplies.

President Reagan renewed his appeal for military support this year and went on national television Sunday night to press his case with the people. But in most Congressional offices the phone calls opposing Mr. Reagan outnumbered those that supported him.

Representative Cheney cited this lack of public response as a major reason for today's vote. "It's a difficult issue to explain to the public," he said. "It's not on the front burner of public consciousness."

Many Democrats also say that the harsh language emanating from the White House, which accused opponents of giving aid and comfort to the Communists, alienated some potential supporters of the President.

"I think their tactics definitely backfired in some areas," said Representative W. G. Hefner, Democrat of North Carolina. "People just said, enough's enough. I think guys screwed up their courage and said, I'm not going to be intimidated, I'm not going to be bullied."

As the debate reached its climax to-

day, opponents of the President repeatedly invoked the memory of Vietnam. Speaker Thomas P. O'Neill took the floor to close the debate for the Democrats and said, "I see us becoming engaged, step by step, in a military situation that brings our boys directly into the fighting."

In a highly unusual step, Mr. O'Neill cast his vote early in the balloting. By tradition, the Speaker votes only in the case of a tie.

Representative Lee H. Hamilton of Indiana, chairman of the Intelligence Committee, sounded a major theme when he said that the President's policy "overestimates what war can do and underestimates what diplomacy can do."

But Representative Claude Pepper, a Florida Democrat who backs the President's request, said a vote in support of the rebels would be a way of saying, "We will not tolerate Communism to be the dominant part of any state in the Western Hemisphere."

Representative Robert H. Michel of Illinois, the Republican leader, closed the debate for his side by turning to Mr. O'Neill and saying in a voice that broke with emotion: "Mr. Speaker, I love you. We're great friends and I respect

you sincerely. But I just have to say, today you're wrong, you're wrong, you're wrong."

Behind Republican's Vote

But Mr. Michel lost because 16 Republicans abandoned the President and provided the margin of defeat. One of them was Chalmers P. Wylie of Ohio, who said he had supported the President's aid request on five previous occasions. He decided to break with Mr. Reagan this time, he said, because "I just couldn't see that those votes have paid any dividends."

Mr. Wylie said he started to sway when phone calls from his district in Columbus ran significantly against the

President. When Mr. Reagan called him today, asking for support, the Ohio lawmaker told him no.

"I didn't want to say no to the President," Mr. Wylie said in an interview. "I was a little nervous about it. But I feel good about my vote. I hope the Sandinistas take it as a sign of peace and friendship."